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Dean Rader

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**TRAVELING TO OKLAHOMA FOR MY GRANDMOTHER'S
FUNERAL,
I WRITE A POEM ABOUT WALLACE STEVENS**

Dean Rader

I

Early October and in Hartford,
The leaves leave on their orange parkas.
Winter sidles up like a bad salesman.

Section 14 of Cedar Hill Cemetery.
The grass, autumn-flecked, stubbles
up: *the uncut hair of graves.*

Twenty-three days from now,
A maple leaf will unzip and
Head to the hard world below

Lighting on the ground about seven feet
Above the darkening body of Wallace Stevens:
Fat man, terrestrial, invisible as a god.

II

October on United Airlines flight 5481, seat 7C.
I am traveling to Oklahoma for my grandmother's funeral,
But all I want is to write a poem about Stevens:

The porch of spirits lingering, the grave in Hartford
Where he lay. My grandmother lies on a table
In the Southland funeral home in Tulsa.

Her body flies out of her body at an astonishing speed,
As though with purpose or direction, like an airplane
funneling home inside some great blue tube of sky.

Like everything else, we are in transit. We all sail
Toward the ocean of the dead, land of unknown arrival
And itinerary. Who is it that plans the schedule of ghosts?

III

The priest attending to Stevens
During his final days in the hospital,
Swears he made a deathbed conversion

to Catholicism, a claim his daughter denies.
I deny him nothing. It is cold in Connecticut.
The heavenly palms and bright green wings

Of Florida might as well be in Ceylon or Esthonia.
Is it possible that in the dissolving moment,
Stevens asked something of the God he believed

Might be a poem, or a woman skating? Who
Is to say that God took him seriously? At what
Point does the believer become the believed?

IV

The elderly woman next to me
In 7D has been peeking at this poem
For several minutes.

I don't mind,
Because the next line is this:
She will die before I do,

As will the man two rows in front
In 5C and his wife in 5D. But then again,
All of us on the plane could get there

In seconds. In the reverse burial that is this sky,
We die forward into the nothing that is not yet revealed.
We are the fading Stevens: we have no idea what lies ahead.

V

I wake and realize it's October 2, Stevens's birthday.
In Oklahoma, the red dirt goes on being red—
The dogwoods, the willows, the beige bony wheat stubs:

The riven days of wind: the sky like a drive-in screen:
The sky like an empty page: the sky like an underground sea.
Take me down, I say out loud, in this soft silver coffin.

It's the other world I want right now. But Oklahoma spools
On below. What I need is to ask my grandmother—
Her entire life a believer—if, in that flash of black light,

In that dissolving instant, she had the opposite doubts
Of Stevens; if she renounced the supreme fiction, the emptiness
Suddenly so clear, beyond the dividing and indifferent blue.